

although reports were that the “white votes” were nearly all cast by three o’clock.⁴² After the polls closed, the ballots were counted and an overwhelming Democratic Party victory. Although election day appeared to pass as a normal voting day, residents of Wilmington knew all too well that election day 1898 was unlike any other the city had experienced. Roving bands of armed men intimidated blacks and Republicans while others escorted less energetic Democrats to the polls to cast ballots under the watchful scrutiny of members of the White Government Unions. The day before the election, men from the WGU were appointed to post themselves at polls all day to ensure Democratic Party victory. The men were instructed to “never look a [white] voter square in the face, even if they knew that John Smith was voting as Willie James and the latter was dead and buried in Oakdale cemetery for lo many years.”⁴³

As the end of the voting day drew near, men who had been charged with watching the balloting were replaced by men who planned to watch and obstruct the election officials count ballots. Red Shirt/Rough Rider leader and election officer Mike Dowling explained that a great deal of planning went into disrupting the count. Dowling and others were taught “how to deposit Republican ballots so they could be replaced.”⁴⁴ Part of the day’s traffic also included men from other wards

who were following the request of the *Morning Star* to “never mind where you live, go into the first and fifth wards to help.”⁴⁵

Governor Russell’s visit to cast his vote generated still more commotion. Russell voted in the city despite threats made against his personal safety. To ensure his safety while in town, he was accompanied by two prominent Democrats who were also his relatives—Walker Taylor and E. W. Sawyer. His return train to Raleigh was stopped and boarded twice by Red Shirts, one set led by future governor Cameron Morrison boarded the train in Maxton and warned him of the danger since it was rumored that others further up the line sought to lynch him. Morrison hid Russell in the mail car at the rear of the train and prevented his discovery when the train was stopped a second time in Hamlet. While Russell was enduring this humiliation, Red Shirts in Raleigh shouted taunts at his family in the governor’s mansion.⁴⁶ Most of the ballot counting took place without trouble but, in some of the precincts, there was difficulty. Democratic Party leaders sought to prevent trouble at the polls and during the counting so that the election could not be ruled invalid by the courts.⁴⁷

Many of Wilmington’s armed residents were prepared for retaliation from blacks that never came. On election day, the city mobilized, and the WLI was called to the armory and held there until early morning on the ninth. During their time at the armory waiting to be called up, the ladies provided the men with plenty of food. WLI member John Metts was exhausted, having been “kept on the go from the time I

⁴² *Morning Star*, (Wilmington), November 9, 1898.

⁴³ W. N. Harriss, interview by Harry Hayden and found in McDuffie, “Politics in Wilmington,” 664.

⁴⁴ Dowling also explained that he and others were instructed by Democratic Party leaders to take weapons to the polls, that the campaign committee distributed whiskey to polls in attempts to get Republican election officers drunk and that specific plans were made to storm a precinct that had a Republican majority in order to overwhelm the election officials and replace Republican tickets with Democratic ones. *Winston-Salem Union Republican*, March 15, 1900.

⁴⁵ The First and Fifth wards were predominately black and usually carried a Republican majority. *Morning Star*, (Wilmington), November 8, 1898.

⁴⁶ Crow, *Maverick Republican*, 134; *Wilmington Messenger*, November 9, 1898.

⁴⁷ *Morning Star*, (Wilmington), November 8, 1898.